

first section is dedicated) to Webber, whose profile touchingly figures in the final part. Jackie Hatfield was not wrong to comment on this sector's tendency to self-historicise and its generally irregular relationship to women artists.

With all the introspective, meandering self-questioning and limp clamouring for positions, the absurdity became painfully apparent of a sector adrift, looking for its leaders in the face of an expansion from the co-operative structures of its 60s and 70s legacy into the public playground of major art (and educational) institutions. The subtext of this quest for the holy grail of a current avant-garde felt more like self-protectionism than meaningful exchange.

Only in the inspiring paper given by Dennis Hopkins and Will Rose, of Leeds-based Lumen and the Evolution Festival, was there a genuine cause for optimism. Hopkins and Rose detailed their recent curatorial work with mainly American artists engaged with video-gaming experiments and computer modifications – Cory Arcangel, Tom Betts, Jodi, Joseph DeLappe and more – whose work not only transcends the staid parameters of experimental film while correlating to its genesis in structural cinema, crossing between auditorium and gallery space, but is also a testament that work made means nothing without being alive, now. Instead of listening to the University of Central Lancashire's John van Aitken's final comments of the conference, hoping it had not 'put us off' experimental film, that perhaps we should all go home 'have a bath and watch some television', I felt more inclined to act, to abandon academia's limiting frustrations, leave the cloisters and quite frankly go out more. 'Today' might just be staring us in the face.

## *Palace Calls Crisis Summit*

I'm in Oberhausen. It's 2002. 'Katastrophe' is the festival's special programme; an epic, exhaustive selection of film and video works that unpick, map and re-invent the catastrophe, historically and in our time, cultural products of a social obsession, of a collective unconscious willing the catastrophe into being, for art, for entertainment, perversely as some indicator that we might be alive. We respond to the information presented in a way prescribed by already being in the cinema auditorium. Moral outrage, validation, political unrest – as an audience (audiences interest me a lot), we are complicit in the spectacle: thrilled, appalled, challenged, frustrated. Under the occupation of the screen...

Film festivals can be lonely places, the auditorium also prescribing isolation. My hotel room, its satellite TV, becomes both a friend and the site of private communication, between oneself and oneself, between oneself and the memory of a world. Events unravelling on the English-language news channels are conversations that I am carrying with me during the day, from the television into the auditorium in increasingly bizarre correspondence, like a growing community. Israel is holding Yasser Arafat hostage in his Ramallah compound. Over the course of these days he is released... I meet Alia Arasoughly, who lives round the corner from Arafat but has just about made it to Germany.

She presents her film *Hay mish Eishi (This Is Not Living)* (2001) and she is talking about news footage, about the margins of the frame and it's the first time I understand this. News reports for Alia are not about the content of an interview but about attempting to see literally beyond their subjects to check on the conditions of the surrounding buildings, houses of her friends, her own house, whether they are still standing, occupied, looted...

On CNN, the Dutch right-wing independent leader Pim Fortuyn is assassinated. In the auditorium, Hamburg has been rebuilt after World War II. Le Pen on the television is celebrating record election results and the people of France begin a public protest. We watch the Hindenburg's collapse and crash in luxurious, horrifying flames. An EgyptAir plane has crashed somewhere. A few hours later the plane hasn't crashed, it's just made an emergency landing. Mediated. *The Eternal Frame* [Ant Farm, 1976] is shown, an incredible, hysterical re-document, re-performance of JFK's assassination in which Dallas residents photograph this re-enactment as if it is real, their belated souvenir. On TV, a Dutch man is interviewed and says 'we used to be a nice, funny country'. Italy refuses Palestinian exiles.

Jump cut. Six months later. Now I'm back in London. November, the London Film Festival. At the Gala screening of Peter Mullan's 'The Magdalene Sisters' there are mob scenes outside the cinema. Police, crash barriers. Based on ('inspired' by) a profoundly shocking television documentary, this feature film re-creates (with some concessions to hair and make-up) the abuses carried out on women in Ireland punished by their own society's adherence to an extremist Catholic doctrine and imprisoned in the vicious correction centres called Magdalene laundries. The director and his cast appear on stage at the end of the film to answer questions and from the floor something incredible is happening. A series of women stand up. They lived through this experience, for real. They are grateful for the film, but their memories are insufferable and they are listing the actual abuses carried out against them which go much further than narrative; this film is only the tip of an iceberg they say. 'The Catholic Church makes the Mafia look like a child learning to walk.' Suddenly something becomes clear.

This is absolutely vital, watching the film together. Catharsis through collective re-experiencing, something that did not happen when however many viewers tuned in to the television documentary, despite it being actually more graphic, more disturbing – inspiring, even. The feature film came close to social work. Ground swell. Two days later and Alexander Sokurov's new film *Russian Ark* is being screened in the same cinema. No crash barriers, but the audience is full of royalty – Prince Michael of Kent is present. Brian Eno is sitting in the row behind. Sokurov genuflects magnificently, repeatedly. Introducing the film he is saying that cinema is a secondary art form, because it is young, compared, say, to oil painting. The Ark, for Sokurov Saint Petersburg's Hermitage museum, is like the actual vessel of salvation. Art (the art the Hermitage contains) will be our salvation and this is Russian. By implication, cinema is not salvation. This is perverse. The idea that art in a national museum is not there because of political, economic, social engineering, is not representative of agendas that museums everywhere would rather viewers (audience) were not aware of. Today's headline on London's local newspaper *The Evening Standard*: 'PALACE CALLS CRISIS SUMMIT'.

With the waves from documenta 11 now crashing on our beaches, Oberhausen's 2003 special programme 're-localization' (2002) is a timely investigation, via cinema, of precisely this ricocheting between the auditorium and the outside world, the seemingly new role of the artist in this context; the meaning of the local in the face of global culture, a frame within the frame, a pocket of resistance? Thematically, a collapse is precipitated, between art and news, between auditorium and television, information and emotion, that in the form of the installation works included also becomes a collapse of space, modes and registers of exhibition. This precisely counters Sokurov's misaligned equation, the festival's line of enquiry becoming a spot marked with and by a brand new 'x':  $x = art + cinema$ .

Given the urgency being attributed to artists operating as social commentators, analysts, documenters, and given that the gallery readily adopts the look of the cinema to facilitate their work, one wonders less about art and more about *cinema: cinema = ?*... Social change?

Information? Collectivity? That is, not only what does it mean for a piece of work to be shown in an auditorium but where are the limitations of this, what is the allure of its co-ordinates, where is the auditorium sited in relation to the world outside itself, how might the equation be unravelled?

Sited in a studio cinema with its seats removed, the works by Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster, Markus Schinwald, Thomas Steffl, Costa Vece and Albert Weis represent as much of an enquiry into the film festival context, as they question the limit of experience itself. Removing the auditorium's seating is an evacuation of the physical determinant that orders how we ordinarily view work in such a space, turning the room into a reference that the installations themselves oscillate around. With each piece shown for a single day, the viewer is able to enter the installation room at any point, repeatedly, and to stay for an indeterminate length of time. This temporal removal from the ticketing and fixed start times of the festival's film programmes is nevertheless within earshot of the café's cash tills, the queues of people waiting to enter the other auditoria and the generally frenetic activity of traditional festival-going. The installation room is also one which members of festival staff move through as a shortcut from foyer to projection box. It is a transitory space precisely because of the terms on which it attempts to assert its refuge. In short, the dialogue that for me was previously conducted between the hotel television's news channels, newspapers, the 'real' world and the resulting response to the content and function of 'film', the auditorium, is shifted into a more discrete dynamic, or, even, contained within and summarised by a shifting space that is much harder to define than the auditorium. In fact this dialogue is localised, encapsulated.

Viewed as a series or as individual works, my response hovers around a particular romanticism. As five frames of a curatorial narrative, the series begins and ends with a storm. From Costa Vece's lighthouse, illuminating disasters on our horizon line, to Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster's *Sturm* (1996), we as viewers shift from witnesses to players, through Albert Weis's *disposition* (2003), from a position of silent looking, to one of acting.

Vece's *La Fin du Monde* (2003) clearly marks the installation room as a sanctuary that is no less emphasised by the local noise of the festival's patrons just outside the door. Sweeping classic cinematic images of space explorations, computer malfunctions, collapsing buildings and explosions on the black walls, as if to illuminate rather than project them; a rough-shod lighthouse, made from cardboard boxes foraged from local shops, is stood on a makeshift plinth of pallets. At the calm centre of this horizon-line destruction, the base materials of Vece's sculpture are in themselves also a reassurance that is not without a sense of melancholy. The boxes of the lighthouse are stamped with their products: 'Procter & Gamble', 'Made in Belgium', 'Pistachios'. The technological failure inducing the videos' apocalypses is thrown humbly into relief, into a correspondence with an imaginary origin of these boxes; mass production, international trade and the local supermarket. And at that moment a festival technician appears from a door at the back of the previously infinite room, crosses the floor and exits into the foyer, another trader, a vessel.

Acts of intrusion. Progressively the act of intrusion becomes increasingly content. Intruding into Albert Weis's constructed metal-lined corridor we find our shadows projected onto the screens that block off each of its ends. A puppet show for our own entertainment, like a James Bond opening sequence, these shadows are the opposite of the surveillance footage that Weis shot in the streets and precincts around Oberhausen, where people pass by, irradiating whiteness due to the heat-sensitive camera he used for filming. The same camera in fact that the coalition forces used to seek and destroy in Iraq, that makes Oberhausen's urban-scape immediately as unfamiliar as Basra at night, an unrecognisable locale that shifts from theatre of fear to playground. The inhospitable is here made safe, celebrated paradoxically by trapping its viewers for the sake of their own release.

Gonzalez-Foerster's *Sturm* turns the installation room into a makeshift studio. To intrude (to view simply, even) is impossible in this room turned inside out. *Sturm* is such a functional collection of components that it flips from object into experience, as if the work rebounds its audience out of its installation space, back through the foyer, into an

auditorium and through to the flipside of a screen showing amateur yet well-lit drama. Well-lit dramas though are few and far between in the Oberhausen context (this is not so much the commercial territory that the *Sturm*-machine re/de-constructs) though what is made clear is another trajectory. When art meets cinema it generally takes its raw material from the commercial mainstream, repositions it, reframes it, re-enacts it: *La fin du monde*, Markus Schinwald's *Diarios* (2003), *Sturm*.

Schinwald's *Diarios* is in fact the closest of the five installations to the look of the cinema. Faced with a screen and a fragmented narrative, the surface of this piece is so acutely replicate of the traditional mode of exhibition as to belie its complex revelry. Schinwald's point perhaps is that there is a direct relationship (obliquely manifested) between a diary made public, the camera's ability to turn an object into its opposite, a set of hermetically sealed signs and the cinematic imperative to communicate. It is through information extraneous to the piece for example that we know the military bunker we think we are seeing is in reality a modernist church. A figure, so reminiscent of Richard Prince's photographs of the American archetypal Marlboro man (who looks like the generic hero of this story) was actually photographed on the outskirts of Vienna. Everything here which is exotic can in fact be found around Vienna, where the artist lives. That the private can become, in a frame, our unfamiliar universal, in much the same way as Costa Vece's lighthouse is not illuminating just any disasters, but our own and in turn, civilisation's.

From Schinwald through Vece's destruction to Thomas Steffl's idyll. *Helikopter* (2003) is no less than the explicit summation of the romantic (as process, as politics) that seems to me to permeate each of these works, as they localise a dialogue with the world by holding a mirror to their local context, their proximity not just to 'cinema' but to our experience of an actual cinema. *Helikopter* is a simplistic extreme of mimesis and abstraction. Transcendental, cognitive, emotional, it is a specific blueprint that is equally elemental. Steffl places a monitor outside the installation room. The festival places monitors outside its auditoria to display the progress of each film programme, relaying a video documentation of the screen to prevent audiences

entering mid-film. On Steffl's monitor is a red helicopter, at the point of take-off, blades pulsing at full speed, yet going nowhere, perfectly stationery in a green field. Projected onto a large, partially translucent screen inside is a silver helicopter, set in the same landscape though shot from a more stylised perspective, its blades also at full speed, overwhelmingly present. Monitor outside, screen inside. Touchstones. The shift in perspective, the red helicopter replaced by a silver one, mimics the semantic shift between outside and inside the auditorium (exterior/interior), between document and experience. Hearing the meticulously remodulated pulsing of the helicopter's blades as we face the screen is nothing short of induced meditation, an acoustic portal into the sublime. The longer I choose to stay in this space the more profoundly affecting this hallucinatory pulsing becomes. The more I choose to suspend myself in this space, the more this suspension effects a cognitive shift, an investment of energy, a removal from the outside world that reaffirms presence. The excitement of this impossibly minimal content is overwhelming. I leave the room convinced of something. I've changed. Social change. Change beyond that which occurs through information. The experience of a perfectly integrated Elysium from which there is no going back.

This is where I began writing, from a position of rethinking. A modification of experience, a movement inside precipitated by all the things outside. A hunch about Coleridge defining the romantic as the willing suspension of disbelief, that space, for Coleridge the theatre, modifies experience but that it's more complicated now than just theatre, sitting in rows, in silence, in darkness, for the prescribed time. That if change is to occur, Coleridge commenting on theatre provoking a leap of faith is as binary as the auditorium, while the process is in fact as nebulous as personal choice, as an extension of being alive. Choosing in fact to enter a space marked 'x' for crossroads.